

Backpacking buddies



Under-the-Rim Trail makes a great first backpack trip

By Tyler Knudsen

For The Spectrum & Daily News

"Dad, am I dreaming?" asked my 6-year-old daughter Zoe as we descended another switchback on the Under-the-Rim Trail in Bryce Canyon National Park.

It was a fitting question for the bizarre world we had immersed ourselves into.

Clearly, our minds had not yet accepted the peculiar tangerine hues or the improbably balanced spires and hoodoos that trademark the eroded edges or "breaks" of the Paunsaugunt Plateau as reality.

I had promised Zoe at the beginning of the summer her first backpacking trip — just the two of us. But every weekend filled up with other duties until we were down to the last weekend before school was to start. After Zoe reminded me of my promise, I checked my schedule and thankfully, it was open.

Bryce Canyon was an easy choice be-



cause its backcountry trails are loaded with great scenery, notoriously free of crowds and as a bonus, the National Park Service was waiving entrance fees that weekend.

With plenty of time to reach our campsite, I let Zoe set the pace which, in typical 6-year-old fashion, alternated from

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TOP: Zoe Knudsen takes a break to study disappearing Claron lake beds. LEFT: Zoe enjoys the view down a hoodoo-filled alley in Bryce Canyon National Park. ABOVE: Life-like, boulder-topped hoodoos march up the hillside at the "Hat Shop." PHOTOS BY TYLER KNUDSEN / FOR THE SPECTRUM & DAILY NEWS



BUDDIES

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a full-out sprint to a crawl.

We discussed lizards, bugs, trees, and starting the first grade. Tilting her head to one side, she skeptically listened as I explained how the rocks around us once filled the bottom of a large lake called Claron that covered much of this region in ancient times.

Zoe was in her element, and I delighted in watching her love for the outdoors blossom. It seemed like just yesterday I was lugging the wide-eyed infant around with her strapped to my back.

Now here she was, carrying her own pack and leading the way.

The trail drops steeply from Bryce Point and follows a ridge top for the first mile, assuring sweeping views. At one particularly impressive overlook, Zoe sat down to watch a playful Clark's Nutcracker dislodge seeds from a large piñon pine cone. I scanned the hillside and could easily follow flat, orderly Claron lake beds for 10 miles or more. But with a slight refocus of my eyes, that orderly state resolved into haphazard decay created by the innumerable rivulets and gullies, tributary to the Paria River, that relentlessly dissect the plateau margin.

As we reached a section of the trail carved into a limestone cliff, I showed Zoe several drill holes that the trail builders filled with explosives and then detonated to break up the rock. Her sharp eyes spotted small natural cavities or "yugs" in the stone that were filled with clear, stubby calcite crystals.

The trail levels considerably where it traverses the head of Merrill Hollow and then snakes out onto a sharp ridge above the "Hat Shop." Here, hundreds of boulder-topped pillars laid below us like an armored regiment marching up to conquer the hilltop.

"Why are the rocks wearing hats?" Zoe asked. I tried to explain how the durable limestone cap rocks or "hats" protect the narrow columns of soft alluvium that elsewhere, easily washes away during each rain storm.

Less than a mile past the Hat Shop, we arrived at our campsite — a pleasant flat nestled amongst manzanita, juniper, and a single, towering ponderosa pine. The cool, rippled waters of Yellow Creek gurgled nearby.

Zoe set out to explore every winding deer trail crossing through camp. I boiled water to re-hydrate our packaged backpacker's meal of noodles and turkey. As Zoe cleaned her plate, I marveled at how the novelty of cooking on a tiny stove and eating out of a bag can make any meal irresistible for even the pickiest eater.

Temperatures dropped after the sun slipped behind the rim and we rolled out our sleeping bags. I

purposely left our tent at home. With one of the darkest night skies remaining in the country, Bryce Canyon offers unparalleled stargazing opportunities that draw hundreds of professional and amateur astronomers every year. With a clear weather forecast, it's borderline criminal to sleep in a tent that would obstruct your view of Bryce's brilliant night-scape, which happens to perfectly compliment the Park's world-class daytime scenery.

Zoe spotted the first star of the night.

"Probably the planet Venus," I explained. Soon, stars began appearing faster than we could count. A remarkably bright Milky Way spanned the heavens.

Then, a meteor streaked across the sky directly overhead — its glowing trail lingered for several seconds. Zoe's excitement over the shooting star quickly turned to concern. "Could one of those hit us?" she asked softly.

"One in a gazillion chances," I guessed as the stream's rhythmic babble lulled me to sleep.

Apparently, Zoe's wonderment of the sky kept her awake much longer than me. The next morning, she enthusiastically recounted all of the shooting stars, bats, spaceships and other fantastic things that I'd missed.

After a re-hydrated breakfast of scrambled eggs and bacon, we began our return trip. The Under-the-Rim Trail stretches nearly 30 miles from Bryce Point to Rainbow Point with several campsites along the way (backcountry permits required), but I knew a simple 6-mile out-and-back with a respectable 1,400 feet of climbing would be challenging enough to make the trip memorable, but not so taxing that Zoe would never want to lace up her hiking boots again.

The steady grade forced us to take several breaks. From beneath shady trees, we observed the color and contrast of the chameleon-like hoodoo-land evolve as the sun made its gradual ascent.

Near the trailhead, we passed a large group of day-hiking tourists speaking Chinese. Convinced I can understand every language on the planet — including baby and cat — Zoe demanded, "What did they say Dad?"

"They said they couldn't believe that such a little girl could complete such a tough hike." Any fatigue her tiny body was feeling disappeared and she charged up the last 50 yards of trail.

As we arranged gear in the car, Zoe asked, "Are we backpacking buds?"

"Of course," I replied with a wide smile, "we're the best backpacking buds ever."

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TOP LEFT: Food always tastes better when you're camping. ABOVE: Tangerine castles line the Under-the-Rim trail in Bryce Canyon National Park. LEFT: Bryce Canyon's "Hat Shop" is a dramatic example of differential erosion. PHOTOS BY TYLER KNUDSEN / FOR THE SPECTRUM & DAILY NEWS

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ST. GEORGE 7-DAY FORECAST

TODAY	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU
Partly sunny	Partly sunny	Sun and clouds	Partly sunny and delightful	Sunny	Sunny, but cool	Bright and sunny
70° 39°	72° 50°	74° 53°	73° 47°	69° 45°	63° 39°	63° 45°

CEDAR CITY 7-DAY FORECAST

TODAY	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU
Partly sunny	Partly sunny with a 1st storm	Mostly cloudy	Some sun	Sunny	Plenty of sun, but cool	Bright and sunny
61° 39°	59° 37°	65° 42°	62° 30°	56° 25°	51° 19°	52° 26°

UV INDEX TODAY

0 2 4 4 2
8 a.m. 10 a.m. Noon 2 p.m. 4 p.m.

NATIONAL FORECAST

Shown are noon positions of weather systems and precipitation. Temperature bands are high for the day.

Legend: T-tornado, R-rain, S-snow, F-flurries, I-ice, C-cold front, W-warm front, S-stationary front.

Legend: c-cloudy, s-sunny, pe-partly cloudy, c-shower, sh-thunderstorm, r-rain, sf-snow flurries, sh-snow, f-ice.

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